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Grayzone, Grifters and the Cult of Tank

The sordid origin story of Max Blumenthal's huckster cadre



Joshua Collins · [Follow](#)

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A photo of US freelance journalist Carl Goette-Luciak with a Nicaraguan Sandinista that Max Blumenthal misrepresented on his blog Grayzone to grave consequences (Photo: Twitter)

The first in a three part series on the toxic influence of pseudo-journalists in the digital age and the danger they represent to the self-determination of peoples across the globe.

Professional liars, conspiracy theorists and old-fashioned fanatics have existed since the dawn of civilization, but in a digital age where clicks are driven by outrage and sensational headlines, these bad actors find themselves in possession of a megaphone with global reach that has never before been seen in human history. But not all grifters and yellow journalists are created equal. That is to say, in media platforms prone to consolidation and driven by outrage, the most extreme voices have a tendency to dominate the field.

The game of exaggerations, baseless accusations and dictator apologia for cash and clout is becoming increasingly dominated by a small and particularly unhinged group of smear-merchants who boast a cultish group of very-online and very-aggressive followers. These electronic minions of misinformation spread the exaggerations, denials and half-truths they receive from their grifter masters with evangelical zeal, and an apparent imperviousness to facts or reality ¹.

Enter Grayzone, a supposedly leftist crew of “journalists” with opaque financing and Russian support.

This all-caps charge against responsible journalism is led by son of a wealthy Clinton advisor, Max Blumenthal and his zany “never met a Human Rights violation we didn’t like” cohorts at Grayzone ². They receive helping hands

from a number of shady media organizations and fringe voices that include Russian disinformation network RT, TeleSur in South America, reknown racists Richard Spencer, Tucker Carlson, a nazi school shooter and even ex-KKK wizard David Duke.

Though they claim to write from the left, their digital fog-machine defies political boundaries, incorporating anti-semitic smears about Soros that have white-supremacist origins, genocide denial tricks pioneered by European fascist parties and the “always discredit or insult rather than respond to fact” tactics of sociopaths like Alex Jones.

Every social movement in the world they dislike is the fault of the CIA, and every government they support, which are unfailingly disturbingly authoritarian, can do no wrong.

These fearless champions of state-violence cheer police forces brutalizing protesters, deny well-documented death squads and rationalize oppression at every turn.

Despite Blumenthal's attacks on journalists who work for publications funded by Soros, he has had no problem accepting money from that source in the past, such as when he worked for the Nation, whose parent company, TYPE Media Center is funded in part by grants from the man he so often demonizes, nor from his time at “Media Matters” which has also enjoyed Soros funding. Oh, and also AlterNet, who helped him develop Grayzone until 2018, when they fired him, presumably because his conspiracy theory mongering was damaging their reputation.

Nor has he been above accepting gifts from the regimes he writes so flatteringly about. Blumenthal and other writers at Grayzone have also been

exposed accepting “journalism prizes” from pro-Assad lobby groups.

What are their motives? That varies from personality to personality, but they all share two traits: an inability to realize the world does not in fact revolve around the United States and the certainty that they know what should happen in countries they don't live in infinitely better than people who do.

As David Smilde, senior fellow at human rights group WOLA and Professor at Tulane aptly stated, they “instrumentalize the realities of the global South for their own purposes — whether that be personal identity work or political battles they consider important — and it's a form of colonialism”

It's American exceptionalism turned on its head — an inability to imagine that people in other countries have the agency to form their own social movements and revolutions without help from the U.S. This worldview leads them to de-legitimize and dismiss protesters in Hong Kong, Iraq, Iran, Nicaragua, Lebanon and Venezuela as illegitimate, and to deny horrific human rights abuses in a score of countries across the globe from Russia to Bolivia.

Grayzone: Defenders of Authoritarians the World Over

I first heard of Max Blumenthal during Grayzone's 2018–2019 “Latin American Human Rights Violation Denial Tour”. Someone sent me a video of Max Blumenthal in a rich neighborhood of Caracas as “proof” that the thousands of Venezuelan immigrants I saw daily did not, in fact, exist.

“You don’t know what it’s like to work all day only be to able to afford a few tomatoes and some lettuce, to make a little salad. And to wake up to your daughter telling you ‘I’m hungry’, but you have nothing to give her. You can’t imagine the feeling of powerless,” — a Venezuelan immigrant near Cucuta, Colombia in 2018



A couple catches a nap as we hitched a ride in a truck transporting scrap metal while travelling with the thousands fleeing VZ. Last year, I walked to Bogota from the Venezuelan border with the “caminantes”. Mini-doc of the trip [here](#). (Photo: Joshua Collins)

The issue? The health crisis he was denying wasn’t happening in the luxury neighborhoods he prefers to frequent on his junket-journalism tourist trips, but rather in the barrios and the countryside where the majority of the

country works for less money per month than minimum wage workers in the United States make in an hour.

As he crowed sarcastically to the camera, I dismissed him as a confused tourist and kept documenting the 5 million Venezuelans who have fled their collapsed country in the biggest mass-migration in South American history.

I talked daily with people suffering from years of healthcare neglect and insecurity while Max stayed in the capital, assuring everyone that the unfolding humanitarian crisis was nothing more than U.S State Department propaganda (reportedly never leaving the safety of rich Caracas neighborhoods).

“You don’t know what it’s like to work all day only be to able to afford a few tomatoes and some lettuce, to make a little salad. And to wake up to your daughter telling you ‘I’m hungry’, but you have nothing to give her. You can’t imagine the feeling of powerless,” one immigrant told me a few days after Blumenthal’s Potemkin Village video variety show, which included mocking employees at a mall in terrible Spanish — employees who at the time most likely worked for \$7 a month. (The monthly minimum wage has since slipped to \$3).

But that was just the beginning. I would hear much from the Grayzone crew over the next year, and learn a lot more about their checkered past, a record that has left a chain of victims around the globe for years.

Flipping Sides After a Trip to Russia

An interview in which Blumenthal laments leftists who would support Bashar Al-Assad in Syria

Max Blumenthal got his start writing about Syria in 2011, where he was staunchly on the side of rebels against Assad. He spoke passionately of atrocities committed by the Assad regime, even resigning from a Beirut paper in 2012 because he claimed they were “Assad apologists”, who “paid me pathetically, barely enough to pay rent in my New York apartment.”

He even goes so far as to say that some of his colleagues in Syria were so caught up in “Anti-Imperialism” that they found themselves in the warped position of defending Assad, whom he viewed as a murderer.

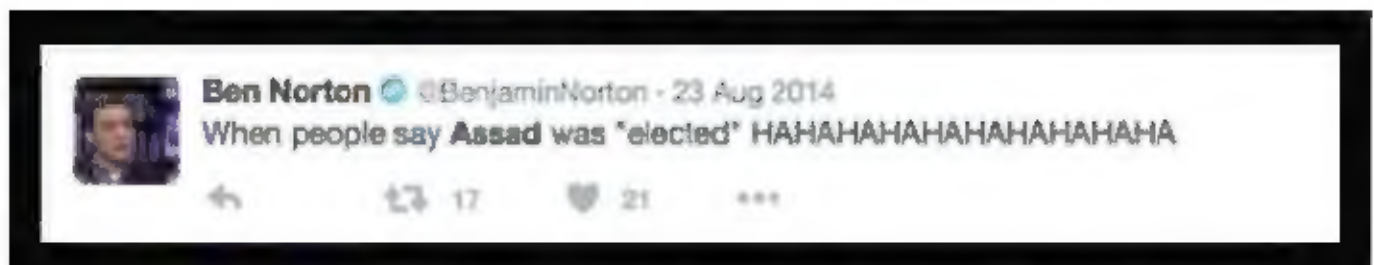
He was accompanied in this endeavor by his mustachioed Brooklyn hipster side-kick Ben Norton, who, unlike Max, dispensed his Syria expertise via internet from New York.

It's unclear what qualifications Norton possessed at the time however, other than a willingness to follow Max's every editorial lead, a bitchin' one-man

noise band, and the sweetest chinstrap in Williamsburg, but he was **on board**, and he was vehemently anti-Assad.

2014 Benjamin Norton on how anyone who denied Assad's genocide was amoral [sic] (expected to be deleted shortly)

On how terrible Assad is, by 2014 Ben Norton, who would make a great debate opponent for 2020 Ben Norton
(also expected to be deleted soon)



Screenshot of a since-deleted anti-Assad, Ben Norton tweet from 2014

Suddenly, in 2015 Max and his pet mustachio flipped sides. It just so happens that they became pro-Assad after attending a Moscow luxury Gala; the same event that got Jill Stein and Trump appointment Michael Flynn (who was paid \$40,000 for attending) in hot water. They were new true-believers in the Assad regime, and enthusiastic apologists for the murderous actions they had previously railed against.

Was it a Russian buy-out that changed their views? That's hard to say. Despite Grayzone's constant evidence-free attacks on other journalists' supposed

connections to the pentagon and the NED (National Endowment of Democracy, which he claims is an instrument of “regime change”), the funding for Grayzone is completely opaque.

It is unclear how they fly a dozen employees around the world and still manage to rent expensive apartments in New York and Washington D.C.

But suddenly Max had a new girlfriend, Anya Parampil (who joined RT in 2014). He also had a new media sponsor and an “Anti-Imperial” axe to grind. Grayzone coverage immediately became pro-Assad. Parampil would soon be fired from RT and go to work full-time for their shadily financed project as they expanded markets and found new countries to exploit outside of the Middle East.

I’m sure it is completely coincidental that everything Grayzone has published since then has towed exactly with the official propaganda coming from the Kremlin, that he suddenly became obsessed with “Russia hysteria” and that his work is now amplified by RT.

But Syria isn’t my area of expertise. Much has been written on Grayzone’s disaster junket-journalism coverage of the Middle East that includes selfies next to torture sites, promoting conspiracy theories about aid group the White Helmets and denying atrocities committed by Assad. My experience lies more in how they have misrepresented Latin America — which they have done with vigor.



Screenshot of a since deleted tweet in which Norton denies reality...again

On Nicaragua, Grayzone and Death Squads

When I first heard of their antics as I worked on the Venezuelan border, Grayzone were recently returned from a trip to Nicaragua. One in which they framed a fiercely violent government oppression of protests that killed hundreds, and injured thousands, as a justified response.

Human rights investigators invited to the country by Nicaraguan president Ortega however, did not agree with those claims. The Inter American Commission on Human Rights stated that the regime had “used lethal weapons against children and students” and had arbitrarily detained hundreds of peaceful protesters who had been subsequently exposed to treatment that amounted to torture, including mass beatings, death threats, sexual assault and psychological abuse that included “threats of rape”, withholding food and water, “threatening to kill their relatives” and even threats of “burning them alive”.

Whether the protests were “valid” or not, would become a moot point; Ortega outlawed public protests shortly after crushing them violently.

As these events were occurring, Max Blumenthal and the Grayzone crew were portraying Daniel Ortega as a hero, hyping his baseless assertions that the students weren’t a legitimate protest movement, but rather a CIA front in a series of articles claiming international conspiracy. These claims were as without evidence as those of the government. Their effort culminated in an absolutely exhausting and fawning hour-long interview with the Nicaraguan president, in which Ortega blamed the hundreds of student deaths on everything from “crime” to “car accidents”.

Before Grayzone left Nicaragua, they would attack a number of journalists and protesters who presented accounts that didn’t fit their pre-conceived narrative. They misrepresented a young protester who released a video of police killing her fellow students that went viral. She was later captured by police and forced to record a “confession” obtained under state torture.

Grayzone ran a story on the event, stating the killings at the University were a hoax, a claim Max would repeat in various interviews while in Nicaragua.

The story Max published however, was penned by an author who **doesn’t even exist**, as exposed in a 2018 report by Charles Davis at the Daily Beast.

It was a breath taking display of a lack of journalistic ethics on the part of Blumenthal.

Also while in Nicaragua, Max penned a lengthy piece in Mintpress heavily implying, if not stating directly, that Carl David Goette-Luciak, an independent reporter who wrote for NPR and the Guardian, was actually a

regime-change plant. In the same piece, he represents a journalist who was killed by government snipers while livestreaming, as being killed by protesters.

His claims were accompanied with a photo of Luciak beside an armed soldier whom Max claimed was opposition. He wasn't. Luciak was actually posing with a Sandinista — a leftist. The picture was taken as part of a pro bono project with Azucena Castillo, a Nicaraguan journalist currently in exile for her work at independent media organization Radio de la Ciudadanía. It's unclear if Max was simply making up the accusation or fooled by government claims. Either way it's a lie that led to grave consequences.



An image that circulated on social media following Max's lie. The photo is accompanied with a caption that falsely claims Luciak was posing with a "A leader of the MRS party." He wasn't.

These false claims led to thousands of people publishing Goette-Luciak's address as well as death threats that forced him into hiding. Eventually Luciak was captured by State forces, threatened with torture and charged with disseminating "fake news" by the Nicaraguan government before being deported from the country.

Defending the use of live ammunition against Nicaraguan citizens, mass-detainment and State sponsored torture wasn't enough however, they had to shift the onus of blame onto the people being massacred. You see, in the bizarro Grayzone worldview, oppressive and murderous police forces are actually champions of the people. When they kill hundreds of protesters, it is always justified.

The Grayzone tactics of cheer-leading state violence, smearing and attacking critics with distortions that put their lives in danger, misrepresenting protesters as hapless, violent pawns of foreign powers and obfuscating facts on the ground have become the trademarked tactics of this crew as they tour the world in search of social media "likes".

These breaches of journalism ethics, white-washing human rights violations and editorializing breaking news against protesters have very dangerous real-world effects.

And as they champion these attacks on the liberty of people in countries they don't live in, they damage the credibility of brave protesters and journalists putting their lives on the line who do.

Max Blumenthal said something back when he opposed war crimes in 2013 that resonated with me.

"People have a right to rise up against oppression"

I agree. It's a shame he seems to now stand for the opposite.

Joshua Collins is a freelance journalist and photographer based in Colombia. He has worked for Al Jazeera, the New Humanitarian and various other organizations in Latin America. For more stories you can follow him on [twitter](#) or at his website [Muros Invisibles](#).

This article was produced independently with no financial assistance from anyone with the motive of improving journalistic integrity and combating misinformation. If you wish to support more independent work like this series in the future you can donate [here](#).

Footnotes:

- 1: These fanatics are often referred to by their detractors as “tankies”, an explanation on why they are called that and the history of the term can be found [here](#).
- 2: Provided of course that Grayzone can present the country committing said human rights abuses as “leftist”, whether they truly are or not is irrelevant.

[Grayzone](#)[Max Blumenthal](#)[Nicaragua](#)[Syria](#)[Media](#)**Published in Muros Invisibles**

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Latin American News from the front lines



**Written by Joshua Collins**

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A reporter on immigration and world affairs, based in Cucuta, Colombia. Bylines at Al Jazeera, Caracas Chronicles, New Humanitarian and more

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What are your thoughts?

mqw

Apr 27, 2020



I proceeded to click the first few links in this article and found out Joshua Collins's arguments are deceptive and disingenuous. Guilt by association, state department propaganda language on RT and TeleSur and downright fabrication on anti-Semitic... [more](#)



167



2 replies

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mqw

Apr 30, 2020



Calm down, c own

Richard Spencer citing the Grayzone makes Grayzone Richard Spencer? Your mental faculty needs some realigning. If Hillary Clinton retweets your tweet, does that make you a murderous war criminal and narcissist?

I am just gonna on y... [more](#)



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Jess Ferments

Mar 17, 2021 (edited)

...

I love how the "anti-semetic smears about Soros" you talk about are literally just a tweet that says "Billionaire Beny Steinmetz is suing fellow billionaire George Soros. Billionaire brawl. Capitalist class catfight" ... Or how when you mention... [more](#)



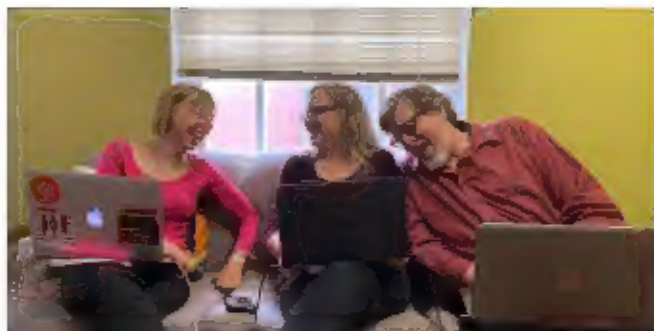
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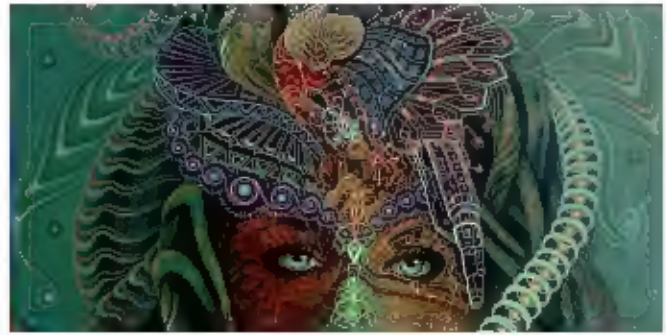


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